

Perspective

**Reflections on Democracy:
A Chinese Perspective**

Han Shaogong

(Translated by Shaobo Xie)

Han Shaogong, of Literature and Art Circles, is one of the leading novelists and essayists in the Chinese-speaking world. His works have been translated into many Western languages such as English, French, German, and Dutch. His numerous writings include *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (1996; English version published by Columbia University Press in 2003), *Bababa* (1985; French version published by Alinea in 1990; Italian version by Edizione Theoria in 1992; Dutch version by De Geus in 1996), *Women Women Women* (1985; French version published by Philippe Picquier in 1991), and *Holy War and Play* (Oxford University Press 1994). *A Dictionary of Maqiao* was acclaimed in 2003 by *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review* as the “[t]he best novel of the year”. A winner of many national and international awards and a preeminent champion for the ‘search-for-roots’ literary movement in the 1980s, Han, over the past two decades, has been provocatively intervening in the debate on democracy and on how to translate Western theory into Chinese practice in the age of globalization. His positions coincide with those championed by critics like Dipesh Chakrabarty in whose view thought is place-related and Western theories always prove to be both indispensable and inadequate when translated into non-Western societies.

* * *

China is a country with a centuries-old tradition of centralized autocracy. Over the past hundred years, it has been seeking to introduce institutional innovations, although such changes have often been caught up in dilemmas, alternating between suffering from ossified autocracy and from naïve democracy. The latter position makes more use of democracy’s weaknesses than its strengths, at times adding to its maladies

rather than to its advantages. The immature version of democracy as sketched here can eventually damage the reputation of democracy, diminishing people's confidence in it, and stifling their in-depth thoughts on democracy, thus pressuring public opinion to tilt in favour of restoring centralized autocracy. This is how the democracy as practiced in China between 1911 and 1913 or between 1966 and 1968 respectively made high-handed military rule appeal to the people. In this regard, ossified autocracy and naïve democracy are two sides of the same coin, working in collusion against political reforms and perpetuating all forms of leadership and patriarchy up to now.

Here one recalls Winston Churchill's famous dictum that democracy is "the least bad of all forms of government." True, the centralization of power or even autocracy can bring about social stability and support economic development,¹ but at least, under the conditions of modern societies, social prosperity devoid of democracy is as capable of sustained growth as an obese body short of white blood cells. Due to its increasing complexity and its growing demand for rational management, modern societies need the support of more flexible and more sophisticated information-sensing systems and reactive regulatory-control systems. Without the people's omni-dimensional supervision, a bureaucratic system increasingly in control of a nation's wealth and financial resources will necessarily breed numerous self-serving interest groups. This situation eventually will cause universal panic as if there were time bombs lying in wait everywhere, and the whole society will be always on the run dealing with "the terrorism of mining disasters," "the terrorism of prohibitive pharmaceutical prices," "the terrorism of pollution," and so forth. The system's "firemen" will be running hither and thither in vain. On the other hand, in the age of the internet and information highways, the public's access reaches everywhere, and can easily penetrate government obfuscation without the support of cyber hackers. If the populace's demand for participation, inclusion, and decision making is not constructively met and guided, then its accumulated discontent, once evolving into heightened psychological tension, will erupt into a destructive political storm. History bears witness to the fact that modern autocrats, no matter how successful in running their

countries, have always been besieged with crises on all sides. Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania, for example, who did a fairly good job in promoting economic development and social welfare, was shot to death by his own countrymen. He had even been awarded an honorary knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II of Britain (later revoked) and hailed as a model of social reform by some in the international community.

Churchill's famous dictum, however, can be supplemented as follows: not only is democracy "the least bad of all forms of government," but it can be constantly upgraded and renewed in function to achieve formal diversity in an increasingly complicated world. As latecomers catching up in the world's democratic process, the developing countries, although unsupported by traditions well known to the West, are not burdened by them, and they have no lack of means for turning late development into an advantage. These countries certainly can borrow universal suffrage, parliamentarism or republicanism, a multiparty system, and a state system comprised of executive, legislative, and judicial powers. But they can also make use of all kinds of indigenous institutional resources: for example, in imperial China there was a system of abdication known as *shanrangzhi*,² (a system of imperial admonition known as *jianguanzhi*),³ *jietiezhi* (the practice of imperial news release in the form of pamphlets),⁴ and *fengboquan* (the office in charge of refuting imperial edicts and sending memoirs to the throne)⁵; in the modern age of revolution there were the practices of *qunzhongluxian* (the mass route), *minzhu shenghuo hui* (democratic life meeting), and *zhigong daibiao dahui* (the congress of workers and staff); in the age of economic reform there are present the resources of *fa-an gongyi* (public discussion of a bill), *wenjuan mindiao* (public opinion survey questionnaire), *wang-shang luntan* (online forum), *NGO canyu* (NGO participation), *xiao-feizhe weiquan* (consumer rights protection). All these practices as well as other experiments, which have contributed to virtuous government one way or the other, can be selectively adopted and implemented, so as to broaden people's perspectives and emancipate their minds, and to nurture the native roots of democracy, forestalling the so-called "unacclimatization" of democracy. Meanwhile, these practices can enrich and expand the concept of democracy, making unique contributions to the

world's political civilization. It goes without saying that a country with a massive population committed to rebirth and revitalization of indigenous civilization should uphold such aspirations and nurture a sense of responsibility to explore and redefine the term democracy, and needs to have sufficient creative wisdom for making institutional innovations.

A few years ago, in Sweden I met a scholar, who was also an official of the European Union. He intimated that democracy was more of a tradition of communication, a way of living, than a manner of government. That said, he took me to an old building to visit the local women's handwork training class, the workers' reading salon, and the community youths' environmental drawing exhibition. He considered these practices to be important sites of democracy. For, in his view, the fragmented and isolated "atomic" individual state of life is the perfect soil for autocracy. Only through communicating, participating, and sharing with other members of the community can people reinforce their consciousness of and their capacity for democracy, and only in this way can they guarantee the emergence, growth, and expression of the public's will, eliminating misguiding propaganda. In his assessment, the European Union's hope of democracy consists much less in politicians' televised performances than in the confident smiles ordinary people wear on their faces. It is exactly for such enactments of democracy that he and his colleagues were striving for more funding, more volunteer support, and more transnational discussion. Notably, these views were expressed by a silver-haired old man. Unfortunately, a few of my countrymen, who happened to be traveling together with me, had no idea what the old gentleman had been talking about, and certainly showed no interest at all in his gibberish about women's handiwork training class or other similar matters. Instead, they stood there vacantly looking about and their gaping mouths unabashedly yawning. They were anxious to go back to the hotel. Even the interpreter translated the word "democracy" with some hesitation, as if the old gentleman had been wandering off the point and as if he could not trust his own interpretory ears. What did those trivial matters have to do with glorious "democracy"? Perhaps in their opinion, only the passions displayed in streets or plazas can measure up to the title and magnificence of democracy.

I have had the experience of marching into a street or plaza in China and elsewhere, holding up a slogan placard, but I know that democracy means much more.

At that moment, the silver-haired old man looked a bit embarrassed and disappointed, unsure of what to say.

It is exactly this embarrassing moment that has urged me to write this essay.

Notes

- 1 Many capitalist countries or areas such as Asia's Four Little Tigers, Britain during Cromwell's Protectorate, France during Napoleon's Empire, and Germany under Bismarck have invariably resorted to centralized or authoritarian power.
- 2 A peaceful way for the throne to pass from one person to another in ancient China. There were two kinds of *shanrang*—one took place within the imperial family and the other between the incumbent emperor and someone else outside the family, which usually brought about a new dynasty.
- 3 The role of the imperial admonisher (*jianguan*) in ancient China was to advise the emperor against making wrong decisions, pointing out potential errors and criticizing mistakes. The imperial admonisher was granted exemption from penalty no matter how harsh his opposition was to the emperor's will. The office of imperial admonition was at its height in the Tang Dynasty and began to decline in the Ming Dynasty. See Qian Mu.
- 4 A protected manner of direct communication between the emperor and his officials. The role of *jietie* was to advise the emperor of the true state of things or of the measures to be adopted or rejected in dealing with a certain situation.
- 5 *Fengboquan* (the right to refute imperial edicts), as much as *jianyiquan* (imperial admonition), was another official way of voicing opposition to the emperor, preventing the monarch from making mistakes.

Works Cited

Qian Mu, *New Perspectives on Chinese History*. Sanlian: Shudian P, 2001. 87–92. Print.